

Undocumented in Honors

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I am a nontraditional honors student. I do not refer to my age (I am 20), or that I did not start college right after high school (I did), or that I am independent of my family (I am not). I am the typical “traditional student” in every sense except one: I am undocumented. (KA)

In the Kellogg Honors College at Cal Poly Pomona, I (SB) have encountered several high-achieving students who, after coming to trust me, have revealed themselves to me as undocumented. These students came to the United States as children through non-legal channels, generally brought by their families, who were searching for opportunities or for escape from dangerous, oppressive situations in their home countries. These students have recently become known as “Dreamers,” after the Dream Acts being debated in the highest levels of government in the United States. Often first-generation college students, they are usually economically disadvantaged.

My family immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 1990 with dreams and hopes of a better life, like many other families in this country’s history. My father, mother and their two- year old daughter (my older sister) began to build a life here. My mother became pregnant with me, and soon things began to go wrong. My parents lost their jobs and the place where they were living. It was a difficult situation for a pregnant woman and a small child, roaming the streets during the day looking for food, and sleeping on park benches at night. My mother decided to go back to Mexico, where I was born, and my father stayed in California. My first nine years were spent without my father. After almost a decade, my mother decided that it was time for the family to be reunited, and we returned to join my father. I started my life in the United States.

I learned a new language and in a short time, through dedication and effort, became fluent in English. I went from being at the bottom of my class, the student that did not know one word of English, to the top of my class. When I graduated high school, I was Salutatorian with a 4.5 GPA. I decided on Cal Poly Pomona because I could not afford to pay for a private university or a University of California

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since I was ineligible to receive any kind of financial aid due to my undocumented status. I was also unable to work legally, and I feared deportation not only for myself, but for my family as well.

Being undocumented, I can't get a driver's license. I use public transportation to get to school and back, a daily two-hour commute. Most of my required classes are in the afternoon, and there have been many quarters where I often waited for the bus at 10 or 11 pm. I was scared, but my dreams of an education and the struggles of my family kept me determined.

Honors programs and directors can greatly assist these motivated, talented students. The first important step is simply to recognize their background and the unique challenges they face because they do not have a legal identity. Simple advantages and opportunities that many traditional students take for granted—receiving financial aid, being able to travel to a conference, doing study abroad, and having employment—are unavailable to these students because they require a social security number or driver's license. Perhaps even more seriously, many undocumented students enter higher education with academic and emotional challenges that need to be understood and addressed by student affairs professionals (Perez, Cortez, et al.).

A 1982 Supreme Court decision granted access to K–12 education for undocumented students, but only 10% of males and 16% of females enroll in college (Fortuny et al. 50). Among these small percentages are valedictorians, honors students, and academic and athletic award winners. Although many undocumented high school students are demonstrated student leaders with records of outstanding academic achievement, their higher education prospects in the United States are limited due to their legal status. Their opportunities stand in contrast to the prospects of traditional high-achieving students who are often able to choose among many options for education.

A further difference between traditional and undocumented students appears after undocumented students graduate from college when they often cannot be employed because of their status. At Cal Poly Pomona, for instance, an Hispanic-serving institution known for its engineering college, an honors, magna cum laude, aerospace engineering graduate was not able to take a job at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory for fear of deportation. Had he been a traditional student, this door would have been wide open.

I come from a low-income community where the motivation to achieve a higher education is low and the means to do it are practically nonexistent. I want to do all I can to change that. I volunteer at a youth center as a tutor, where I plant the seeds of curiosity and

desire to learn in children. I want to be an inspiration for other non-traditional students to pursue a higher education and even become honors students. I plan to graduate from Cal Poly Pomona and the Kellogg Honors College with a degree in business administration and go on to law school to become an attorney.

Honors programs and colleges value civic engagement along with academic excellence. An examination of civic engagement among undocumented Mexican students revealed that 90% of respondents had been civically engaged (Perez, Espinoza et al.), this despite frequent feelings of rejection, part-time employment, and significant household responsibilities. Traditional honors students do have personal challenges but generally not ones that include the level of vulnerability and uncertainty faced by undocumented honors students.

The following are some ways you can make the hard lives of undocumented students a little easier and broaden their opportunities both in and after their participation in your honors program:

1. Communicate your awareness of undocumented students (“Dreamers”) in various official and unofficial but low-key ways. You can, for instance, post “Dreamers Ally” placards and include supportive language on your course syllabi and your organizational and personal websites.
2. Educate yourself to a reasonable degree on applicable state and federal laws and programs. For example, in California it helps to know about Assembly Bill 540 or the more recent California Dream Act, which includes AB 130 and 131.
3. Facilitate travel for undocumented students when they cannot drive or fly because they lack an ID. If you have students who refuse to attend a conference, gently probe why; they may be undocumented.
4. Seek out scholarships and aid that do not require citizenship or a Social Security number.
5. Do not lower academic expectations. Instead, look for ways to be more flexible in allowing students to fulfill the regular expectations.
6. Support students in maintaining their high levels of intrinsic motivation. Undocumented students do not have the extrinsic motivation provided by the anticipation of a good job, which they may not be able to get after graduation because of their status. Encourage them in their love of learning.
7. When they graduate, strive to stay in touch as with other alumni. Provide ongoing networking opportunities and be ready to provide strong recommendation documents.

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Decide upfront how you will respond when people question undocumented students' right to education and other public or private benefits. Understand the possibility that you have undocumented students at your school even though you may not know it. Remember that practically every one of these students was brought here as a child, and the U.S. may be the only country they know.

Undocumented students in honors might look traditional in almost every way, but they are not. They have challenges unlike those of any other group in honors, and to serve them and their dreams well, honors programs and colleges must get to know them better.

REFERENCES

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